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ABSTRACT

A child's success in school is often determined by the level of involvement of the family in his or her education. This newsletter presents articles on helping parents collaborate in the schooling process. The title article describes the "universal controlled" public school choice allowed in several Massachusetts school districts, and a report evaluating its impact. The report notes that the majority of parents, including low-income and minority parents, receive their choice of schools, and that well-organized parent information centers are essential to providing all parents with information about schools and counseling them in making good choices. The remaining articles in the newsletter are: (1) "On the Road to Readiness: Roadblocks, Alternate Routes, Checkpoints, and Refueling"; (2) "Surveys and Summaries Help Schools Identify and Analyze Current Practices of Partnership; Develop More Comprehensive Programs; (3) "Families and Schools Begin Action Research To Strengthen Involvement"; and (4) "Parent Centers Send Clear Message: Come Be A Partner in Educating Your Children." (HTH)

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RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT REPORT

CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING Sept. 1993, No. 4

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Providing Parent Information for Public School Choice in Massachusetts Cities

ED 380 228

Choice is a central issue in the examination of effective parent, community, and school relationships. Choice puts parent involvement right up front, into the initial school selection process. It puts the concept of community on the line, blurring the distinction between one neighborhood and another, so often drawn around the local school that children attend, and emphasizing instead the voluntary community of parents and teachers who have decided that a particular school corresponds best to their own ideas and values.

Proponents and opponents have been arguing back and forth for a long time about the effects of school choice. One major question is: Will the children of low-income and minority parents, especially in our cities, be left in ineffective schools as higher income and white parents make more sophisticated decisions to take advantage of choice for their children?

Ten Massachusetts cities have been implementing universal controlled choice for their public schools for varying lengths of time—Cambridge since 1981, Boston, Fall River, Lawrence, and Lowell since the late 80s, and Chelsea, Holyoke, Northampton, Salem, and Springfield since 1990 or 1991. In Section 1 of *Parent Information for School Choice: The Case of Massachusetts*, Center researcher Charles L. Glenn of Boston University describes the controlled choice plans that these cities have implemented and the effects that have been documented on student assignments.

In Section 2 of the report, Glenn reviews studies conducted in the United States and in other countries on the motivations of parents taking part in choice programs and the reasons they give for selecting schools. In Section 3, Glenn and researcher Kahris McLaughlin of Boston's Freedom House use data from in-depth interviews and observations to examine how parent information centers function in the Massachusett cities. Finally, in Section 4 of the report, Laura Salganik of Pelavin Associates reports on the results of telephone and written surveys of parents taking part in the school choice process in the cities.

Some basic conclusions of the research in each section of the report stand out. First, under controlled choice plans the great majority of parents—including lower-income and minority parents—get their children into the schools they select. Second, there is strong support from the general public to allow parents to choose the public schools their children will attend. Third, well-organized parent information centers are essential to providing all parents with information about schools and counseling them in making good choices. Fourth, parents choose schools based on information that they get from both informal sources (such as friends and neighbors) and formal sources (such as parent information centers and printed materials); and their reasons for their choices are varied.

Controlled Choice Addresses Equity Concerns

Controlled choice as practiced in the Massachusetts cities has some general principles, according to Glenn. Automatic assignment of students to schools on the basis of residence is abolished. Parents of children who are new to the school system or children who are moving to the next level of schooling receive information and counseling (if they wish) about all options. Parents indicate their preferences for schools they want their

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Under school choice plans, "The great majority of parents of pupils . . . received their first-choice school," according to Glenn.

children to attend, listing at least three schools in rank order of choice. Assignments are then made that satisfy these preferences according to available capacities but within the constraints (controls) of local policies and requirements, which vary from plan to plan.

Universal choice policies are intended to accomplish four objectives, Glenn notes:

(1) to give all pupils in a community (or in a geographical section of a larger city) equal access to every public school, not limited by where their families can afford to live;

(2) to involve all parents (not just the most sophisticated) in making informed decisions about where their children will go to school;

(3) to create pressure for the improvement, over time, of every school through eliminating guaranteed enrollment on the basis of residence; and

(4) where necessary, to achieve racial desegregation of every school with as few mandatory assignments as possible.

Glenn asks three questions about how controlled choice works in the Massachusetts cities. To what extent do parents get the schools they want under these school choice plans? Are their choices limited significantly by desegregation requirements? Does the school selection process manipulate their preferences to imply that the school choice system is a success? Glenn analyzes school assignments in Boston for the 1991-92 school year to answer these questions.

Getting What They Want. In March 1991, 38,700 Boston pupils were assignable to grades 1-12. During the assignment period (into June), approximately another 5,000 pupils entered the Boston system. Altogether, 43,432 pupils were assigned over three rounds of assignment.

"The great majority of parents of pupils entering grades 1-12 (88.6 percent) received their first-choice school or—in the case of no application—the current school," according to Glenn. "Over 96 percent received one of the schools selected and less than 4 percent received an assignment for which no request had been made, many or most of them parents who did not return applications."

Are minority parents as successful at getting what they want as white parents? Glenn cites a recent report by consultants to the Boston system which found that "...81 percent of white applicants but 85 percent of those from African American and other racial groups were assigned to their first-choice schools."

In sum, Glenn finds the controlled choice plans provide equity in choosing—low-income and minority parents exercise their choice as readily as higher income and white parents—and equity in access—the children of both groups get their first-choice schools almost equally.

Desegregation Constraints. Glenn finds little evidence that assignments to grades 1-12 were limited significantly by desegregation controls. Of the Boston students who were assigned involuntarily, Glenn notes, "this was not primarily attributable to the requirements of desegregation." For example, "... there was only one Boston high school out of fifteen to which freshmen of one racial/ethnic category were assigned involuntarily while those of another who had made it their first choice were denied admission, in order to meet desegregation requirements."

Citing data from 1990, Glenn notes that: "Altogether, only 1.7 percent of the students assigned to the entry levels of Boston schools ... (238 of 14,041 first, sixth, and ninth graders) were either denied a place or assigned involuntarily to a place that another student was denied in order to meet the requirements of desegregation."

Are Parents Manipulated? No, says Glenn—he found no evidence that parents are "manipulated" to select schools that they do not really want. Recommending that parents make more than one choice, including less popular schools, is necessary because not everyone can get into the most popular schools. But no parent is asked to make a less-popular school his or her first choice, and parent information centers counsel parents that they have nothing to lose by making the most popular schools their first choice. And, as noted, the great majority of parents get their child into that first choice school.

Although Glenn finds that his study of controlled choice in the Massachusetts cities provides "... evidence that parent choice of schools can be organized in a way that is fair to low-income families...," he stresses that the positive effects of choice can be achieved *"only if choice is organized carefully to assure fairness, integration, and school improvement."*

"Thus we do *not* concur with those who believe that unregulated choice will, of and by itself, lead to better education for all," he emphasizes.

Next Steps. Glenn's examination of controlled choice makes a strong case that the need for equity in school choice can be met, given a fair selection process and the provision of appropriate information to all parents. But the second major question—will choice produce more effective schools?—remains unanswered.

"Despite an enormous recent literature supporting or opposing choice as a way to bring pressure to bear for school improvement, there is remarkably little evidence on what actually happens inside the schools when choice policies are implemented," Glenn notes. To investigate "what actually happens," Glenn is now examining in detail how four public middle schools in Boston have responded to the choice process. Principals, other staff members, parents of sixth-grade (newly admitted) pupils, and the sixth-grade children themselves have been interviewed, and the information is being analyzed to determine "to what extent schools go through positive changes in order to respond to the 'educational marketplace.'"

Also being examined is the influence of state and school system standards on limiting or encouraging school diversity and choice and, in turn, how choice affects the implementation of high standards.

Yes, We Want To Choose, and Yes, We Have Our Reasons

In section 2 of *Parent Information for School Choice*, Glenn reviews the results of earlier research, both national and international, on public attitudes toward school choice and research on the motivations of parents in selecting schools. He relates the previous research to his own findings of how controlled choice is working in the Massachusetts cities.

The central message about public attitudes toward choice is that choice is strongly supported. "The genie is out of the bottle...," Glenn notes, "the majority of Americans (and of Europeans) now expect to be able to make school choices. . . ."

Significantly, Glenn notes, the support for public school choice is stronger among parents than nonparents, among women than among men, among younger respondents than older respondents, among African American and Hispanic respondents than among white respondents, and among city-dwellers than among suburbanites.

Glenn's review of the literature reveals that parents choose schools for their children based on "a complex mixture of convenience, quality, and other considerations."

This suggests, Glenn notes, that "... the closer the respondent is to the actual experience of children in schools, the more likely she or he is to support policies allowing school choice."

The reasons that parents give for choosing a specific school vary in complex ways. Opponents to choice usually claim that less sophisticated parents (low-income and less formal education) will mainly choose convenience, so their children will remain in the neighborhood school. Proponents of choice argue that all parents want educational quality for their children and will choose accordingly. Neither of these positions are supported by Glenn's review—instead, a complex mixture of convenience, quality, and other considerations emerges.

Glenn points out that ". . .educational quality (however assessed) is by no means insignificant but does not have the paramount importance that might be assigned to it by policy theorists." Overall, parents seem to "... take a more realistic view of education as comprising many experiences that cannot readily be measured by research and evaluation. For example, an urban parent who chooses a school with inferior test scores because she is convinced that her child will find it a safe environment is not necessarily making an unwise or inappropriate decision."

Urban environments include low-income parents, minority parents, non-English speaking parents—groups in which many members have neither automatic access to information about schools, nor knowledge of channels for getting information, nor even a belief the system will work to their benefit. Cities in the Massachusetts study operate parent information centers to provide all parents, and especially parents who need it most, information about schools' programs and the school selection process.

Parent Information Centers Essential in Urban Choice System

There are more than 20 parent information centers in Massachusetts, some of which have more than one office. The typical parent information center:

- is conveniently located, including proximity to public transportation;
- has three or four multiculturally representative and multilingual staff (usually members of the community) on duty at a time, with a desk and space to talk with parents;
- contains shelves or racks of materials about local public schools and maps showing their location, written in languages common to the community; and
- contains computer workstations for accessing information on the available seats in each school.

Glenn and McLaughlin report their findings from in-depth interviews with

parent information center staff and observations of staff's activities. "For disadvantaged families," the researchers note, "the location of the [parent information center], its welcoming atmosphere, and the participation of its staff in community life play an important role in whether they will make effective use of information available."

The centers have successfully increased their efforts to reach out to low-income and especially language-minority parents to get them to register their children the spring before they would start school, so they'll be more likely to get into the school of their choice. In Fall River, for example, the proportion of kindergartners who were not registered until school started dropped from 21 percent in 1988 to 7 percent in 1989 to 2 percent in 1991.

In counseling interviews with parents, center staff provide information about schools, explain the school choice and assignment processes, including the constraints on choice, and then walk a fine line—helping parents make good choices while not interfering with their choice process. Center staff report that they avoid suggesting what is best for a particular child; however, they will try to influence decisions when parents are obviously confused or when "factors clearly dictate that one choice may serve a child more appropriately than another."

What Parents Say About Making School Choices

"Parents make decisions that are reasonably well informed, and ... they are not manipulated as they make these decisions," Glenn and McLaughlin report. But they see it as a weakness in the process that parent information center staff are not in a position to offer critical judgments or damaging information about the various schools. They suggest that a source external to the school system should develop objective informational materials about the system's schools for use by the parent information centers and community groups.

In section 4 of *Parent Information for School Choice*, Laura Salganik reports the results of a telephone survey and a written survey designed to learn more about parents' perspectives on the school choice process, particularly about their sources of information. Both surveys were of parents registering their children for kindergarten. Salganik cautions that, although the respondents vary by parent education and family language, "no attempt was made to obtain a random sample of parents." The surveys were "exploratory and the results should be interpreted in that context."

The survey findings highlight the success of the parent information centers in this study in providing information to disadvantaged and minority parents. According to Salganik: "Respondents who had not graduated from high school and those interviewed in Spanish were in fact more likely than others to [discuss] the choice process and discuss particular schools at the [parent information centers]."

The surveys also found that parent information centers were used more by parents enrolling their oldest children—meaning that they were undergoing their first experience with the choice process.

The survey results also provide more information about how parents viewed "convenience" versus "educational quality" in their choices. Attendance at a school by a sibling and proximity to home were the most frequently cited reasons for choosing a school when offered on a list of options, but these reasons were supplemented by education-related reasons, such as school staff and atmosphere, in responses to open-ended questions.

Next Steps

This project is continuing its work describing equitable, effective ways to disseminate information to parents about school choice and to investigate the effects of that information on schools. Glenn and his colleagues are now conducting interviews and collecting other data in four inner-city schools to investigate what effects a school's efforts to get more parents to choose it have on the school and its students. Future phases of the project involve the small-scale implementation and testing of a model parent information process, parent interviews to investigate how choice affects the relationship between families and schools, further exploration of the role of parent information center staff, and production of a handbook on the "nuts and bolts of responsible school choice." ■

On the Road to Readiness: Roadblocks, Alternative Routes, Checkpoints, and Refueling

Given our national educational goal that every child be ready to learn when entering school, Center researcher Colleen Morisset at the University of Washington examines the steps that must be taken along the road to school readiness.

Common roadblocks to academic learning can emerge during the first three years of children's lives, says Morisset, including early language difficulties and socio-emotional problems. But we have some understanding of the social and psychological conditions that can lead to or diminish obstacles to learning, and we have good examples of early intervention programs that help children stay the course toward school readiness.

We can't afford to wait until children enter the education system to begin dismantling roadblocks to learning or begin helping children detour around them. "Current practices of waiting to act until children exhibit academic difficulty are inefficient," Morisset declares. "Waiting permits negative situations to worsen... so when remediation does begin, it [must be] more intense, long-term, and expensive."

"By applying Band-aid models to school readiness," Morisset says, "we overlook a powerful way to help all children. To prepare children for learning, and reduce the risk of school failure, we must support children's development right from the start."

Social Influences on Language and Emotional Development

Morisset reviews the literature on what we know about social influences that make a difference in infants' and toddlers' language and emotional development. Concerning language development, we know that the quality of parent-child interaction is a key, Morisset says. We also know the special importance of rich verbal experience, including sharing stories and books and the use of cognitively demanding open-ended questions. We even know how to structure reading/sharing experiences between parents and children—through such techniques as "dialogic reading"—to facilitate language development.

And perhaps one of the most important things we know is that, although children from low-income homes are more likely to experience developmental delays and language difficulties, effects of social class are not set in stone. Morisset notes that "...qualitative differences in mother-child interaction are predictive of child outcomes above and beyond the effect of family social status."

We know less about how to assure the healthy emotional development of children from birth to three years old. Most examinations of emotional development in children have focused on maladaptation and dysfunction, Morisset notes. But the emergence of a "risk and protective factors" approach has proved to be helpful in explaining not only how emotional problems develop, but also how children at-risk for these problems may avoid them.

The fact is, Morisset points out, long-standing clinical and empirical evidence shows that "even in the most stressful conditions, many [very young children] continue to function adaptively and effectively." These stressful conditions include numerous environmental risks to emotional health such as poverty, parental mental illness or substance abuse, families with high levels of conflict and discord, and so on.

However, Morisset reminds us that the relation between adversity and subsequent child functioning is complex and involves characteristics of the caregiver, the child, and the environment. Children's responses to adversity—and their emotional development—are modified by the timing of events; individual child characteristics such as age, sex, temperament, and cognitive development; and characteristics of relations with and among family members.

Thus the risk and protective factors approach offers theoretical and practical guidance for understanding emotional development in early childhood and for advocating and developing supportive social and family structures. But there's a caveat. Although recent research highlights the "resilience" of some children who cope successfully in the face of severe life stress, Morisset notes that these children are small in number. She cautions: "Their fortitude should not tempt us to minimize the more pervasive deleterious effects of psychosocial stress. . ." suffered by so many other very young children.

Successful Interventions

Morisset describes the implementation and results of four comprehensive and successful preventive intervention programs for infants and toddlers. Two of these promote early language and preliteracy development (Boston City Hospital's Reach Out and Read, and the Brookline Early Education Project); two promote favorable social and emotional development (the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project, and the Houston Parent-Child Development Center).

These programs—along with many other successful preventive intervention programs, Morisset emphasizes—have some commonalities. "Intervention programs that have helped seriously disadvantaged families improve conditions for their children are alike in several ways. Among the most important of these is the recognition that parents' abilities to meet their children's emotional and intellectual needs are inextricably bound to their own mental health, social, and educational resources."

Successful programs, according to Morisset, often take a community-based approach to family services. These programs, she says, "support the contention that community investment to change parents' knowledge and beliefs about early development can help strengthen families, and that such strengthening has major benefits for children."

"In a community-based model," she notes, "service providers, administrators, and participating private and public institutions..." can all work together to create programs in step with the desires of the community and to make services widely available.

Getting on the Road to Readiness

In her review of research that examines social influences on early development and of successful intervention programs, Morisset builds a solid case that we know a lot about how to help families help their children be ready for school.

She supports the position of the Zero to Three/National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, with whom she is working: "The preconditions for learning are good health, unhurried time with family, responsive caregiving, safe and supportive environments, and special help for families in desperate need," Morisset concludes. "These principles are deceptively simple. Assuring that every child has the opportunity to learn will require collaboration among community and health care agencies, families, and schools on the road to readiness."

Next Steps

In the project's next phase, Morisset studies mental health needs of and services for toddlers in the Lawndale section of Chicago (urban) and Fremont County, Colorado (rural). Next year, she will adapt community-based, inter-agency, language development intervention—Seattle's Parents Are Reading to Kids (SPARK)—to the needs and resources of these two communities. ■

Surveys and Summaries Help Schools Identify and Analyze Current Practices of Partnership; Develop More Comprehensive Programs

More and more schools and districts are recognizing the need to develop effective parent, community, and school partnerships.

They also are recognizing the need to first collect survey information about what their current practices are and what their parents, teachers, and even students think of those practices, other potential practices, and the need for and goals of parent involvement in general.

Then the survey data must be analyzed and summarized to provide a base on which to build more comprehensive and successful partnerships among parents, community, and schools.

Center researchers Joyce L. Epstein, Lori J. Connors, and Karen Clark Salinas at Johns Hopkins University, in collaboration with Maryland teachers and administrators, have produced survey questionnaires to provide information for planning partnership projects. Forms are available to survey teachers and parents in elementary and middle schools, and to survey teachers, parents, and students in high schools.

The *teacher questionnaires* allow teachers to provide professional judgments about parent involvement practices, what they are currently doing, and what programs they would like to see developed. *Parent questionnaires* let parents describe how they feel about the school, how they are currently participating, how well the school keeps them informed, and what practices they would like to see initiated. *Student questionnaires* ask high schoolers how they interact with their families on school matters, how the school helps their families to be involved, and what types of family-school partnerships they would like to see.

How To Carry Out a Survey

In addition to the survey questionnaires, the Family Center researchers have developed a step-by-step description of how to carry out an effective survey of teachers, parents, and students.

The process includes reviewing the content of the questionnaires, deciding between doing a survey or using alternative methods to collect information (through panels, focus groups, breakfast meetings, interviews), adding site-specific questions, preparing a cover letter, distributing and collecting the surveys, processing the data, analyzing and interpreting the data, discussing the results with the respondents, and, finally, beginning the process of building a comprehensive program of school and family partnerships based on the data.

Summarize Your Survey Data

For each question asked of teachers, parents, and students in the surveys, the researchers provide a form for summarizing and interpreting the responses.

For example, question 4 in the parent surveys asks parents to indicate how well the school provides them with information and involves them in activities. For fifteen items—ranging from "help me understand teen development" to "provide information on community services that I may want to use"—parents of high school students indicate whether they think the school "should start" the practice, "could do better," or "does this very well now."

Parent responses on question 4 (and responses to parallel questions on the teacher and student surveys) provide raw data about how the school currently keeps them informed and encourages involvement, and what they would like to see done better. The items in question 4 cover the six major types of involvement in Epstein's framework for comprehensive programs of partnership.

The researchers provide a format for analyzing and summarizing data gathered from this question. First, for each item, you fill in a table to document the percentage of parents who responded "should start," "could do better," or "does well." In the next step, you circle the practices that receive over 40 percent of the parents' responses. This provides a quick profile of what your school's parents perceive to be strong, weak, and needed practices.

This summarization and interpretation process is followed for each question asked of parents, teachers, and students. In a final step, a format is provided for integrating the information from each group of respondents into a list of practices that all agree need to be improved or need to be added to the school and family partnership plan at the school.

Next Steps

Six high schools in Maryland, working with Center researchers, are using the data from their surveys of teachers, parents, and students to plan a program of partnership. Each school has formed an Action Team for School, Family, and Community Partnerships and has outlined a three-year plan to develop new practices based on the six major types of partnership. The Center will report the results of the analyses of data from these schools and their progress as they build their programs. ■

Families and Schools Begin Action Research to Strengthen Involvement

Imagine a group of parents and teachers sitting together for a few hours every month talking about the impact that a home visitor program they have initiated is having on the academic success of the school's students. Imagine these same parents and teachers documenting how the program is being implemented, collecting data through interviews and surveys, reflecting on what they learn, and then making changes in the program. Imagine further that this group is writing up its work in the form of a case study.

The Center's Parent-Teacher Action Research project has brought together such teams of parents, teachers, principals, and facilitators. According to researchers Don Davies, Ameetha Palanki, and Patricia Burch of Boston University and the Institute for Responsive Education: "Action research provides parents and teachers with a process for creating knowledge about what works and then using this knowledge for the continuous improvement of their family or community involvement program."

What is the Parent-Teacher Action Research Project?

The Parent-Teacher Action Research Project is being conducted in eight schools which are part of a national reform network, the League of Schools Reaching Out. The work of this network is coordinated by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE). The schools applied for and received funds from IRE's foundation grants to carry out a family and community involvement project of their own choosing.

Each school has formed an action research team which is collecting information on the program and its benefits for children and families. Each team meets regularly to review and reflect on project progress and to coordinate strategies for improvement. Funds from cosponsoring foundations also provide a part-time facilitator who works on-site from six to eight days a month to assist the project and coordinate the research. Center research staff in Boston are complementing the school-based research through cross-site analysis and examination of the effects on policy.

Four key questions guide the study:

1. How do schools choose and carry out their family and community involvement projects?

2. What are the effects of school strategies and practices on children's learning and on the attitudes and behavior of educators and families?

3. What kinds of policies and practices help and/or get in the way of school-family collaboration?

4. In what ways do policies and practices of school-family collaboration influence each other?

Common Obstacles, Innovative Strategies, and Interesting Effects

In their first year, action research schools faced common challenges, tested new strategies, and documented a number of interesting effects. The development of the action research team was one of the first common challenges. This includes not only how the team was formed in each school but also how each progressed through four stages of development in the first year: orienting participants to the project, building the participation of parents and teachers, promoting group solidarity, and moving from action to reflection.

Teams responded to the uncharted territory of parent-teacher action research by defining their own specific project goals and objectives. In meetings and memos, they focused on how the action research team should relate to other decision-making bodies within the school, how to identify indicators of project success, and how to disseminate information on the project schoolwide.

Some schools determined that the action research team should not be separate from the team responsible for implementing the project (e.g., home visitors). They believed that individuals actually carrying out the project were in the best position to design and assess its effects. Other schools determined that the role of the action research team should be to coordinate parent involvement projects schoolwide. For example, one school designed its home visitor program in conjunction with other existing parent involvement activities by deciding to target second grade families.

Most teams identified the need to increase participation of both teachers and parents in the research process. One school offered teachers the responsibility of designing family portfolios to document changes in children that might not be captured in test scores. At another school, teachers keep journals to record changes in student behavior. In a few instances, parents have taken on significant responsibilities such as making presentations about the program at community and regional events.

As the scope of projects expanded, teams began to identify the in-house and community resources which could help them meet their goals. Some teams began with an effort to run more effective meetings by curbing the number of topics addressed at one meeting and creating a time for individual progress reports. Recognizing the project was more than one facilitator alone could manage, a number of schools gave other members of the team responsibility for running specific parent involvement activities.

Schools and their Projects at a Glance

Anwatin and Northeast Middle Schools are in Minneapolis, each with about 800 students. Under a joint project initiated by Minneapolis Public School Staff and the University of Minnesota, both schools have created a team of parents and teachers to develop and evaluate new strategies for encouraging student success. Northeast has a program of sex education. Anwatin's project creates direct communication between home and school by installing answering machines and phones in classrooms.

Atenville Elementary School in Harts, WV is in the foothills of Appalachia and has about 209 students. One goal of the Parents as Educational Partners Program is to improve communication between families and the school. The school is reaching out to the least connected parents through a church-based parent center, a parent-to-parent phone chain, and home visits. The seven-member action research team is looking at how the program helps students and families by compiling portfolios on children's progress and their family's involvement.

Fairfield Court Elementary School is in Richmond, VA between two low-income housing projects. Most of the 530 children (pre-school - grade 5) come from single-parent families. Under a three-year grant from the Plan for Social Excellence, the school is crafting a comprehensive child development program (pre-school through grade 2). A team of home visitors (parent educators) visit parents bi-monthly, work with them on home-learning activities, connect them with community resources, and serve as classroom tutors once a week. About 40 parents keep journals on their work and its effects on their children.

Ferguson-Florissant School District (MO) has begun a program called Boxes for Babes for families with infants age 10-24 months. An off-shoot of Missouri's Parents as Teachers program (nationally recognized early childhood and parent education model), 70 families are participating. A team of parent educators works with mothers on activity boxes which contain different toys and materials which parents can use with their children.

The Samuel Gompers Fine Arts Option School serves about 547 children in fourth through eighth grade. In southside Chicago, the school introduced a male mentoring program in the fall of 1991. A core team of 14 mentors recruited from the community spend at least three hours a week working with students in and outside classrooms. The action research team helps mentors examine strategies for effectiveness, e.g. one-on-one tutoring, group work and home visits.

The Patrick O'Hearn School, in the racially and economically mixed neighborhood of Dorchester, in Boston, MA, became a special education integration model school in 1989. Children with severe disabilities from pre-schoolers to grade 4 and regular education children learn together in the same classroom. The home visitor project is part of a series of programs designed to build parent involvement. The home visitor team consists of parent volunteers who have received two days of training and meet monthly to problem solve. The school is looking at the impact of home visits on achievement of children in kindergarten/first grade.

The Matthew Sherman Business and Government Preparatory School (San Diego, CA) serves more than 1,220 students of which 85 percent are Spanish speaking. Bilingual parents were recruited as home visitors. The action research team includes two students and coordinates the parent involvement program which consists of home visitors, teacher training workshops, a parent center and the Organization of Latino Parents (OLP).

In other instances, teams identified new sources of community support for the project. They arranged meetings in local churches and community centers, asked local universities to provide facilitation and technical assistance, and contacted community organizations and state policymakers to lay the groundwork for future financial support.

Initially, the reflective elements of action research seemed a burden to most facilitators and their teams. Gradually, schools have moved toward making critical thinking an integral part of the project, taking simple steps to make reflection easy and useful for schools. For example, they have created time and meeting space for structured reflection, formed subgroups of parents to do planning and coordinating so that more meeting time could focus on problem-solving, and hosted off-site team retreats.

How Are Project Learnings Being Shared?

Teams are gathering information on the challenges, strategies and effects of their family and community involvement projects for use by other schools, organizations, and policymakers who want to begin or support parent involvement projects in their own communities.

A number of school teams have presented information about their programs to other schools, organizations, and district and state policymakers. Some schools participated in the Center's national videoconference; some have written articles, developed brochures, and designed project scrapbooks. Each school is writing a case study about its project. The case study will be an insider's (parents, school staff, students) look at the project, focused on the questions raised above. Final case studies will be completed in the spring of 1994, and a report will be published by the Center in late 1995.

Implications for Practice

Davies, Palanki, and Burch conclude that parent-teacher action research can help schools assess and improve their family-school-community partnerships. They cite the following implications for practice:

1. Parent teacher action research can work in diverse settings. Action research teams may differ in size, make-up, and function, but a process for increasing program outcomes has taken root across geographically and otherwise diverse schools. Schools' growing investment in action research is evident in their efforts to secure additional funds to expand the scope of action research, share findings and process with other schools, and network with other schools around action research.

2. Action research can help schools identify important barriers to collaboration between parents and teachers. Action research teams found their efforts impeded by factors such as lack of time for teachers and parents, lack of physical space for planning and implementation, and negative expectations of parents and teachers about each other's competence. Having to deal directly with obstacles such as these has helped focus school attention on internal barriers to parent-teacher collaboration.

3. Action research can help schools identify the needs of parents and children which the program has not met. Parent-teacher action research schools are at varying stages of moving toward a comprehensive approach to parent involvement. Feedback obtained through journals and peer interviews has revealed some of the "unspoken needs" of children and families. For example, interviews with students at one school alerted team members to the need for female mentors. At another school, parent to parent interviews helped less involved parents voice their sense of exclusion from the school.

Implications for Policy

There is early evidence that action research is changing schools' parent and community involvement practices. However, the success of these strategies depends on the extent to which the policy context enables them to be sustained. With this in mind, the authors note the following policy developments across schools:

1. Action research schools are moving toward coordinated and creative use of Federal, state and local funds. When asked what is the greatest policy obstacle to family-school-community partnerships, principals are likely to point to lack of funds. In the past year, the eight schools have worked to address this obstacle through coordinated and creative use of funds for parent involvement activities. Three have applied for school-wide project status, which would enable them to use Chapter 1 funds for all children in the school. One is negotiating with its district to increase flexibility around the use of funds. Other schools are creatively tapping new sources of support, such as local businesses, the state department of human resources, and universities.

2. Action research schools are making decisions about parent and community involvement programs based on their own evidence of what works. Action research involves planning what to do next *and* determining what should be dropped. Action research teams have little patience for aspects of the project which seem to be going nowhere. In their decisions to revamp an entire project, to merge action research teams, to discontinue an activity, school teams are making decisions which they believe place the needs of children and families first.

It may take schools more than two-and-a-half years to build a strong project base. But news from the field suggests they are ready for the challenge. In the words of Darlene Dalton, principal at Atenville Elementary in West Virginia, "This isn't a two-and-a-half year project. This is a ten-year project. We plan to be looking for ways to help our children, today and a long way down the road." ■

Parent Centers Send Clear Message: Come Be A Partner In Educating Your Children

A profound change in school/family relationships has been gaining momentum in the past quarter-century, as both schools and families have moved toward understanding that parents need to be collaborators in the schooling process.

One component of this change—the establishment of parent rooms or parent centers in schools—has been quietly emerging in the past five years, largely unnoticed and undocumented amidst the clamor for school reform through choice, restructuring, site-based management, and other initiatives.

In fact, when Center researcher Vivian Johnson of Boston University began a review of the research on this emerging phenomenon, her quest ended abruptly: no research could be found that documented the existence of parent centers in schools and their significance for changing how parents and schools work together to provide children with the best possible education.

Johnson found nothing available "indicating the number of parent/family centers throughout the country," and she found no descriptions of "the function of parent/family centers in developing and supporting school-family partnerships." She has now produced descriptive information that establishes a base for research on parent centers and their effects, through a survey of 28 schools nationwide (all of whom are members of the League of Schools Reaching Out) that have established and are running parent centers.

Johnson describes how and when the centers were put in place, the logistics of their operations, and the activities they engage in. Her survey included 23 el-

ementary, three middle, and two junior high schools located in 14 states.

What Is A Parent/Family Center?

Parent/family centers are, first and foremost, a direct signal from the school to parents that they are welcome in the building to engage in collaboration in the education of their children. "The idea of a special place for parents in schools represents a significant symbolic and structural change in schools' relationships with families," Johnson points out. "Educators are symbolically changing the role of parents from outsiders (invited guests) to insiders (members of the team)." Parent rooms or centers "represent a profound change in the way educators view the role of parents in schools and the way parents view their role in their children's formal education."

Parent/family centers are designated rooms or space within the school building where parents can "gather and decide what they will do and how to do it," Johnson notes. Many parents see the centers as "a place of their own," a place where "everyone feels welcome because the school hierarchy doesn't interfere with relationships." Parents invite teachers, other school personnel, and children into the centers to work with them.

Most are officially called Parent Centers; some are called Family Centers (to indicate that all family members are welcome); some focus on their close social connectrions, as in Parent Club, and others try to reflect a more global outlook (such as the Parent-Community Networking Center). Whatever the name, they are a recent, emerging phenomenon—of the 28 schools surveyed by Johnson, all but two began their parent centers within the last five years. Initiatives for beginning the centers came from all directions—parent requests for a place of their own, teacher and parent requests for space to work together more closely, decisions made by principals, and implementation of a district policy of parent involvement.

The centers may be more prevalent in schools that have recognized school-family partnerships as an important area to pursue. At the time of her survey, Johnson found that 31 of the 70 schools belonging to the League of Schools Reaching Out—a network of schools seeking committed to empowering partnerships with families and communities —had established parent/family centers.

Space, Staff, Funding Vary

Johnson's survey reveals that facilities, funding, and staffing differ among her 28 centers. Some centers have generous space—a full classroom or other full room; others share space with other programs; others have space enough to store materials but little else. The centers' operational hours vary according to parents' needs, staffing, and the ebb and flow of school activities, and include before- and after-school hours and weekends for special events.

Some centers are led by parent volunteers; most, however, indicate they have paid staff or are trying to raise funds to acquire such—the consensus being that paid, stable staff is important to coordinate consistent parent involvement. Most staff are parents or former parents from the schools, but a third of the centers have teachers as coordinators.

Staffing is the largest expense faced by the centers, followed by books and materials for parents; refreshment and telephone costs consume most remaining funds. Only a few centers have stable funding; most play catch-as-catch-can with funding, living on some combination of school funds, fundraising activities such as carnivals or bake sales, and donations. "Furnishings and other equipment are often donated," Johnson notes. "Nearly half of the centers have a telephone, television, and VCR."

Whatever the space occupied or hours of operation, whether staff are paid or volunteer, whether funding is secure or iffy, Johnson notes that most of the parent/family centers "manage to be comfortable welcoming environments with a bottomless coffee pot, snacks, comfortable chairs, and often toys and books for pre-schoolage children."

What Do Parents Do At Parent Centers?

Johnson examines parent/family center activities in the six types of family-school partnership developed by Epstein (see Research and Development Report, March 1993), ranging from fulfilling the basic obligations of parents to collaboration and exchanges with the community.

Most activities emphasize four of the six types: families meeting their basic obligations for their children's health, safety, and development; families and schools engaging in school-home and home-school communication; parents serving as volunteers and audiences; and parent involvement in governance, decision making, and advocacy.

"All schools reported that their parent/family centers are used to provide parent information," Johnson reports, "and nearly all centers conduct parent workshops or classes on a variety of topics in response to parental needs." More than half of the centers also provide social service referrals and child care, and about one-third have lending libraries that offer books, audiotapes, videotapes, and toys. About one-third of the parent/family centers are also involved in school efforts to coordinate home visits and

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The *Research and Development Report* of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, distributed at no charge, summarizes results of the Center's research. Full reports of each study may be ordered from the Publications Office, Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, Johns Hopkins University, 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218. (See last page for report numbers and prices.)

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Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning

Don Davies, Co-Director, Boston University
Joyce L. Epstein, Co-Director, Johns Hopkins University

Mission and Programs

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the *Program on the Early Years of Childhood*, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the *Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence*, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership.

Program on the Early Years of Childhood

Sharon Lynn Kagan, Program Director

- Family Education and Training in Early Care and Education (Sharon Lynn Kagan, Yale University)
- Ethnographic Study of Family Support for Young Children's School Success (Susan McAllister Swap, Josephine Bright, Nitza Hidalgo, and Sau-Fong Siu, Wheelock College)
- The Effects of School-to-Home-to-School Communications on Children's Motivation and Learning (Carole Ames, Michigan State University)
- Natural Support Systems: Impact on Puerto Rican Families, Communities, and Schools (Melvin Delgado, Boston University)
- Home and School-Based Preventive Interventions in Elementary Schools; Integration of Family Support and Mental Health Services in Elementary Schools (Lawrence Dolan and staff, Johns Hopkins University)
- Partners in Learning: Family Literacy Programs (Lori Connors, Johns Hopkins University)
- Parent Information for School Choice (Charles Glenn, Boston University)
- Studies of Policies to Increase Family-School-Community Partnerships: (1) Studies of Reaching Out Schools: (2) Identifying and Analyzing Policies; (3) Policy Information and Guidelines (Don Davies, Patricia Burch, Ameetha Palanki, Boston University and Institute for Responsive Education)
- Study of Parent Centers in Schools (Vivian Johnson, Boston University, Institute for Responsive Education)
- The Road to Readiness: Family Needs, Community Resources, and Infant/Toddler Development (Colleen Morisset, University of Washington, Center for Clinical Infant Programs).

Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence

Diane Scott-Jones, Program Director

- Family, School, and Community Connections in Early and Late Adolescence: Research, Development, and Improved Practice in Middle Grades and High Schools (Joyce Epstein, Karen Salinas, Lori Connors, and staff, Johns Hopkins University)
- Adolescent Mothers and Their Children; Family and School from Kindergarten through Adolescence (Diane Scott-Jones, Temple University)
- A Study of Coaching in Community Settings (Saundra Murray Nettles, Johns Hopkins University)
- Integrated Service Delivery: The New Jersey School-Based Services Program (Lawrence Dolan and staff, Johns Hopkins University)

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translate materials from English into other languages spoken by families.

Three parent centers coordinate food cooperatives in which families can purchase food at reduced prices. Two parent centers house GED programs to prepare parents to obtain high school equivalency diplomas. Individual schools reported a range of other parent center activities to better prepare parents to meet their basic obligations, including family counseling, drug prevention, parent peer and support groups, job counseling, nursing services, housing assistance, and a parent service exchange bank.

Seventy-five percent of the parent/family centers sponsor school decision-making meetings of groups such as school-parent councils, involving parents in the governance of the school. Parents, through their centers, sponsor special musical, sports, and other events, and get heavily into fund-raising activities. But they also get involved in working with students—about 40 percent of the parent centers coordinate parent volunteers who serve as classroom aides, go along on field trips, and supervise students in libraries, cafeterias, and playgrounds. In about 25 percent of the centers, parents get into instructional activities such as tutoring workshops and after-school tutorials.

Next Steps

In the next stage of her research, Johnson is conducting case studies in four urban schools in San Diego and Boston to examine their parent/family center structures, activities, and effects.

Three are elementary schools that vary in size and in the racial and language backgrounds of the student populations. The fourth is a junior high school that has an unusually high level of parent participation. ■

References and Reports

Full reports of studies may be ordered at indicated prices from Publications Office, Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, Johns Hopkins University, 3505 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218.

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Epstein, Joyce L., Lori J. Connors, and Karen Clark Salinas. *High School and Family Partnerships: Surveys and Summaries.* Includes Section 1: Questionnaires for Teachers, Parents, and Students, and Section 2: How To Summarize Your School's Survey Data. 1993, ($8.00).

Also available are two resources from the Institute for Responsive Education: "Working Paper No. 1, Family Centers," available free, and the 20-minute videotape "Building Community: How to Start a Family Center in Your School," available for $15.00. Write: Publications, Institute for Responsive Education, 605 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215.

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